

-- Senator Jim Jeffords' Dispatch From DC --
- Volume 1, Issue 2 -

August 2005

Dear Vermonters,

Welcome to another issue of ***Dispatch From DC***, a quarterly update on my work on Vermont's behalf in the United States Senate. I hope you will find this issue helpful and informative.

Congress recently passed a 5-year, \$286.5 billion highway bill which will increase Vermont's share of total highway dollars from an average of \$125 million a year currently, to \$175 million a year, a total increase of \$250 million through 2009. This represents a 40 percent increase in funding for Vermont. In all, Vermont will receive more than \$1 billion over the five-year period, with specific projects included. In addition to creating thousands of jobs throughout Vermont, the highway bill will dramatically improve our state's roads, bridges and rail lines. This legislation also includes nearly \$100 million for projects to improve highway, road and rail mobility in Vermont's Western Corridor running from the Massachusetts border to the Canadian border. As the Ranking Member on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, I have been working on this legislation for over three years and I am delighted that Vermont will finally receive this much-needed federal support.

As many of you know, I announced in April that I would not seek re-election to the United States Senate in 2006. Representing Vermont in Congress has always been a great honor and privilege and my decision to forego re-election was very difficult. I would like to thank everyone for their kind words and support following my announcement. For the next 17 months, I am determined to work harder than ever for Vermonters in the Senate.

If you have any questions about ***Dispatch From DC*** or any other issues, please feel free to e-mail me at vermont@jeffords.senate.gov, visit my website at jeffords.senate.gov, or call my office at (800) 835-5500.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Senator Jim Jeffords

*Please feel free to forward **Dispatch From DC** to any other interested Vermonters.*

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Increasing Exports of Vermont's Agricultural Products

In May, I traveled to Cuba to promote Vermont's agriculture exports, and to learn more about how Vermont's farmers can take advantage of trade opportunities with Cuba. Under the current trade embargo, medical supplies and agricultural products are allowed to be traded with Cuba. I was pleased to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with representatives of Alimport, the Cuban trade organization, which I hope will lead to a more productive trade relationship between Havana and Montpelier. The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets has negotiated a trade deal with Cuba for three commodities: heifers, apples and powdered milk. I am supportive of any opportunities for Vermont to find new markets for its high-quality products. Please visit the following web site to learn more about my recent trip to Cuba:

http://jeffords.senate.gov/cuba_album.html

Protecting Patients from Preventable Errors

I am happy to report, after six years of debate and negotiation, President Bush signed into law the Patient Safety and Quality Improvement Act. I first introduced this legislation in 2000 after an Institute of Medicine (IOM) report estimated that each year there are around 98,000 unnecessary deaths due to preventable medical errors. As a remedy, the IOM urged that a new system be developed through which health care providers could report and analyze data, thereby reducing the incidence of medical errors.

The Patient Safety and Quality Improvement Act implements these recommendations by allowing health care providers to voluntarily report medical errors in an environment where information and data enjoy legal protection. That said, the new law does nothing to affect other federal, state or local reporting requirements pertaining to health related information. Nor does it alter any existing rights or remedies available to injured patients. Instead, this legislation creates a new, parallel system of information collection and analysis, designed to educate our doctors and protect patients' safety.

Congress Provides Relief for Vermont's Small Businesses

As part of the emergency supplemental appropriations bill that passed in May, the Congress included language to help Vermont businesses address the shortage of employees for the busy tourist season. The provisions were based on a bill I cosponsored, S. 352, the Save Our Small and Seasonal Business Act. The legislation temporarily exempts from the H-2B visa cap employees who have recently participated in

the H-2B visa program, allowing Vermont businesses to meet their staffing needs during peak tourist seasons.

The tourist season is critical to Vermont's economy and this law will help Vermont businesses hire the employees they need to make the tourist season a success for Vermont and the tourists who visit our great state. Please visit the following web site to view the speech I gave to the full Senate explaining the need for this important change in the law:

http://jeffords.senate.gov/~jeffords/press/05/04/041405h2b_statement.html

Transitioning to a new Medicare prescription drug program

Over the next several months, Vermonters who are eligible for Medicare will have the opportunity to learn about and enroll in the new Medicare prescription drug program and to choose a prescription drug plan that best meets their needs. For most Medicare recipients, the voluntary enrollment and plan selection begins on November 15th and the program will start providing drug coverage benefits on January 1st, 2006.

Undertaking any new program, especially one of this magnitude, can be confusing. That is the reason there are many national and Vermont groups already partnering to help eligible Vermonters enroll in a plan that best meets their needs. There are many sources of information currently available if you would like to learn more about this new program. People with access to the Internet can start by logging on to national sites such as www.medicare.gov or you can call 1-800-MEDICARE. Locally, Vermonters can go to www.medicarehelpvt.net, or call Vermont State Health Insurance Assistance Program at 1-800-642-5119. Finally, Vermonters should always feel free to call any of my offices and I will do all I can to get you the information and assistance you need:

Rutland Office: (802) 773-3875
Montpelier Office: (802) 223-5273
Burlington Office: (802) 658-6001
Washington, DC Office: (202) 224-5141

Fighting for Better Veterans Health Care

The Bush administration recently announced a \$1 billion shortfall in the Veterans Administration (VA) health care budget. I find this news to be both tragic and outrageous. During the debate on the Emergency Supplemental funding bill for Iraq and Afghanistan, I joined a number of my colleagues on the Veterans Affairs Committee in an effort to increase funding for the VA. These requests were continuously ignored, as opponents argued that the VA was sufficiently funded and did not require an increase. At a time when record numbers of American service men and women are returning home

with both visible and invisible wounds of war, it is absolutely unconscionable that the funding to provide for these individuals simply is not there. The House and Senate have now passed the Interior Appropriations Bill, which the President signed into law on August 2. I am pleased that this legislation included \$1.5 billion for Veterans medical services through the Department of Veterans Affairs. Please know that I will continue to fight for full funding for the VA to ensure that our soldiers get the care they need, both tomorrow and 20 years from now.

Confirming Fair and Independent Judges

The Republican leadership in Congress, unhappy with a judicial confirmation rate above 95%, recently attempted to change Senate rules to eliminate unlimited debate on judicial nominations. This so-called “nuclear option” would have been an affront to the system of checks and balances that this country was founded on. Before the Majority Leader could trigger the “nuclear option,” a bipartisan group of 14 senators reached an agreement that prevented him from taking such action.

This agreement has become particularly important in light of Justice Sandra Day O’Connor’s recent retirement announcement and President Bush’s nomination of Judge John Roberts to replace her. Justice O’Connor has demonstrated independence throughout her exemplary service on the high court. As Senator Leahy and other members of the Judiciary Committee prepare to hold hearings on this nomination, I look forward to learning more about Judge Roberts’ record and qualifications to serve on the Supreme Court.